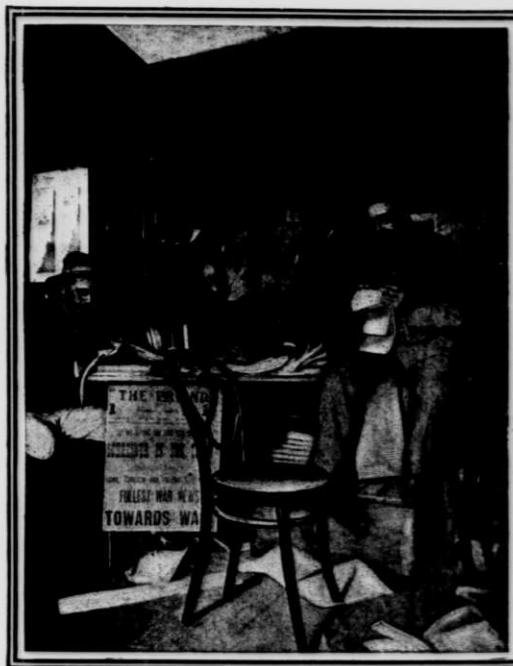


MR. CROCKETT IN TWO MOODS.*

Mr. Crockett has written several more exciting stories than "The Silver Skull," and at least two superior to it in technique and in the loves and humours of life, but none that is in the true sense of the phrase more of a genuine historical romance. But for certain Ouidaesque touches—and even these are perhaps not inappropriate—like "the swarthy fisher-folk of Adria" and "the red-lipped, saucy-eyed maidens by the fountains"—it comes very near the perfection of a compact melodrama. And such a compact melodrama a book of this kind ought to be, or it is an absolute failure. Mr. Crockett deals with an actual historical incident, the putting down of the Red Terror in Apulia by an Englishman, General Richard Church. Ciro the priest—by the way, his "red eyes" and his "seventeen murders" are insisted upon once too often, and with too aggressively Dickensian emphasis—and his Secret Society, and the cigarette he was smoking when he was executed, are all hideously fascinating facts. Mr. Crockett was bound to make a powerful narrative or a powerful melodrama out of the material at his disposal. It was unnecessary for him to perform the one task; if he was to perform the other, then Incident, Incident, Incident, was bound to be his cue. And so, from the moment when Isabella, who is Countess of Monte Leone in her own right, though she is ignorant of the fact, sees the chief of her house struck down by the agent of the "Silver Skull" Society in the midst of festivity, to the happy honeymoon time when she goes off with her dull-witted Scotch husband, Walter Cameron, and sees the mother of the Vardarelli sitting on the roadside and gazing at the head of Ciro "with a kind of holy joy on her countenance," there is nothing but blood and fire, plot and counter-plot. And this is all as it should be, because it is historically as well as luridly Italian. There is certainly not a dull page in the book; under the circumstances this is success. But it has much positive as well as negative literary merit. Mr. Crockett's powers as a descriptive writer—occupying a position midway between James Grant and R. L. Stevenson—stand him in good stead. There are some excellent battle-pieces, although the last stand of the Vardarelli is too long drawn out; and one siege-piece, a better than which it would be difficult to find in contemporary fiction. Then the three heroes of the story—the picturesque and "legitimate" brigand, Don Gaetano, the chief of the Vardarelli; the patient and masterful Englishman, Richard Church; and that modern "damn'd Iago," the Abbate Ciro Annicharico—are admirably contrasted. Strong in incident, Mr. Crockett is weak for once in the realisation of female character. The mother of the Vardarelli is a very conventional avenging angel; and the heroine, Isabella, although she acts her part well enough as an Italian "daughter of the regiment," going out with "the gay Vardarelli riders," plays the sweetheart very poorly. Even she, however, deserved somebody of more character than such a sobersides as Cameron, Church's aide-de-camp, whose ridiculously impossible jealousy of his superior officer is a blot upon Mr. Crockett's art. "The Silver Skull" proves that its author would make a most effective playwright.

In "Cinderella" Mr. Crockett is once more on his native heath, in the company of eccentrically single-minded ministers, of robust lads and lasses, of tyrannical, warm-hearted, and plain-spoken serving-men and serving-women, and thorough-going scoundrels. The story is as different as it well could be from "The Silver Skull," and it is at once more pleasant and more disappointing. One feels that in telling how poor Hester Stirling came by her own in the shape of a lover who is the son of a peer and a fortune in rubies which amounts to £10,000 a year, in giving us rich specimens of the "ranch" tongue of Megsy Tipperlin, Hester's nurse, and even in dwelling on the pull-devil pull-baker of Sylvanus Torphichan and Juno Chetwynd, Mr. Crockett "lets himself go," as he certainly does not in narrating the duel between Richard Church and the diabolic Ciro. On the other hand, "Cinderella" does not possess the very genuine plot interest of "The Silver Skull." It is somewhat incoherent; here and

there it suggests—though the suggestion may be very unjust—the probability of its having been written hurriedly and in instalments to suit the emergencies of serial publication; and it is too crowded with characters. Hester Stirling is a good contrast to the artificial and selfish but not wholly bad Torphichan girls, but she is not so full-blooded as some of her author's other creations; and Cyrus Darroch, although he is worth a score of Cameron in "The Silver Skull," is not a young Scotsman, but an English public-school boy. His father is a trifle too contemptible; David Stirling, Hester's mysterious father, is too Italian in his vindictiveness; and his father-in-law, though on the whole he makes a good scoundrel, is too aggressively oily. Nor can Mr. Crockett be congratulated on the manners of his aristocratic society. All the same, "Cinderella" as an old-fashioned yet vigorous story of poetic justice will be appreciated by other than Scotch



Frontispiece. "War's Brighter Side." (Pearson.)

readers. Megsy Tipperlin, too, the careful watch-dog, is a valuable addition to Mr. Crockett's gallery and to the portraiture of disappearing Scottish "types."

WILLIAM WALLACE.

WAR'S BRIGHTER SIDE.*

Although the war has been responsible for so many and such a wide variety of books, this is entirely unlike any other it has yet occasioned. It covers a period of one month only, from the date of Lord Roberts' entry into Bloemfontein to the commencement of his march towards Pretoria; and the social life of the army and of the surrendered township during this interval is succinctly presented by Mr. Julian Ralph in his breezy, familiar style, with valuable sidelights in the way of official proclamations, reports, leaders, and miscellaneous articles reprinted from the *Friend*. In fact, the volume resolves itself mainly into a history of the inception and early progress of that remarkable journal.

Two days after the occupation of Bloemfontein, Lord Roberts requested certain of the war correspondents to undertake the publication of a daily newspaper for the entertainment and information of the army, and the *Friend* was the result. It is the first paper ever produced in such circumstances, and Mr. Ralph was happily inspired when he com-

* "The Silver Skull." By S. R. Crockett. 6s. (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1901.)

"Cinderella." By S. R. Crockett. (London: James Clarke and Co. 6s.)

* "War's Brighter Side." By Julian Ralph. 6s. (Pearson.)